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ON PAGE A-10

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The president's supporting cast

"Maximizing the incumbency" — to recall one of the raffish phrases of the Watergate era — is an old practice in any presidential election in which a sitting president is a candidate.

But unless the man at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue begins to raffle off the White House silver for his war chest, or something of the sort, the courts are unlikely to interfere. Just about the only restraint is the president's sense of decorum.

Mr. Carter, as we know, does things a little differently. He was the first president to have himself photographed as his own luggage-bearer. He delivered his first fireside chat in a cardigan. He banned the playing of "Hail to the Chief," even on high state occasions.

That was during his man-of-the-people phase.

Now we notice that "Hail to the Chief" has made a comeback, even on political occasions. When Mr. Carter spoke to the Consumer Federation of America the other day the Marine Band was on hand to play it. The president also dresses spiffily these days for all public viewings; blue suits and conservative neckties are the kit of the day. The word has gone forth from the Oval Office, moreover, that the president is too busy being president to campaign.

This is the presidential phase. In most respects it's an improvement.

But *The Star's* Jack Germond reported the other day one manifestation of the presidential Mr. Carter that is not an improvement. All over New England this weekend voters are seeing a television commercial, running a bit less than five minutes, in which the president is shown conferring with Warren Christopher, deputy secretary of state, and Adm. Stansfield Turner, director of Central Intelligence, about aid to Nicaragua.

"But the unwritten rule," Mr. Germond reminds us, "has been that both the State Department and the CIA, as well as the Justice Department and Department of Defense, are kept entirely free of involvement in partisan politics. . . . The ad is only one measure of the extent to which Mr. Carter is going to exploit the national security issue and the support he has evoked from the electorate on Iran and Afghanistan."

Perhaps President Carter should be given the benefit of the doubt — not on the practice itself, which is distinctly out of bounds, but on the failure to perceive its implications. Those who once made a fetish of trifling with minor White House traditions and customs — like wearing morning dress for the swearing-in or listening to "Hail to the Chief" — may not be able to distinguish between mere iconoclasm and serious breaches of decorum.

The unwritten rule cited by Mr. Germond — that certain departments are acceptable recruiting grounds for campaign foot soldiers and others not — rests on more solid foundations than whimsies of music or dress. One likes to think that the director of the CIA and the deputy secretary of state (and others, including the attorney general and the secretary of defense) are servants of the republic rather than members of a supporting cast for political advertising.

When they appear in television campaign commercials that expectation is undermined. Someone could even get the impression that they regard the president's political fortunes as more important than the nonpartisan duties they are sworn to perform. That would probably be a gross misimpression. But it is a misimpression no president should encourage.